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ABSTRACT

Family background as a single entity, as distinguished from schooling in its effect, has been found to play a dominant role in children's educational outcomes on such indices as academic achievement, school persistence, and educational attainment. What are the mechanisms and/or processes through which family background creates and reproduces these educational patterns? Among the different theories proposed to understand the mechanisms/processes is the theoretical concept of forms of capital -- financial, human, social, and cultural. The concept of these four forms of capital and their relationship to education are critically examined, compared, and contrasted. A conceptual framework that incorporates family background, the concept of forms of capital, schooling facilitation, and educational outcomes are outlined. The conceptual framework is employed to explain the educational achievement patterns of three groups of children: (1) single-parent children, (2) children with employed mother, and (3) recent immigrant/refugee children. The paper refers to these three groups as "children of change." The paper concludes with theoretical and policy implications. (Contains 29 references.) (BT)

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FAMILY BACKGROUND, FORMS OF CAPITAL, AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN OF CHANGE

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In the field of sociology of education in the Western countries, the influence of "*family background*" on children's educational experiences has occupied a prominent position. Family background as a single entity—as distinguished from schooling in its effect—was found to have a dominant role to play in children's *educational outcomes* (Coleman, 1988) on such indices as academic achievement, school persistence, and educational attainment (which, in turn, largely determine children's subsequent life chances and mobility in the society). However, what are the *mechanisms*, and/or *processes*, through which family background creates and reproduces these educational patterns?

In the past several decades, different theories have been proposed to understand the mechanisms/processes. Among them, the theoretical concept of forms of capital—*financial, human, social*, and *cultural capital*—offers us insightful understanding. According to Coleman (1988), family background should be analytically separated into different components. He proposed that the three forms of capital—financial, human, and social capital—be regarded as its basic components to account for the mechanisms/processes through which family background exerts its powerful influence on the observed educational patterns of children. Bourdieu (1973; 1986), writing about French society, also identified *cultural capital* (in addition to financial and social capital) as a powerful mechanism of educational and social reproduction.

In this paper, the concepts of these four forms of capital in relation to education will be first critically examined, compared, and contrasted. Then a conceptual framework that incorporates family background, the concept of forms of capital, schooling facilitation and educational outcomes will be presented. Following that, the conceptual framework will be employed in explaining the *educational achievement* patterns of three groups of children in the United States—single-parent children, children with employed mother and recent immigrant/refugee children (For convenience, I

will refer to these three groups of children as "children of change"). Finally, theoretical and policy implications will be discussed.

Theoretical Concepts: Forms of Capital

In the following, I examine the four forms of capital—financial, human, social, and cultural capital. Where necessary, I compare and contrast these concepts in regard to their differential functions in children's education.

Financial capital

Financial capital is purely an economic concept. It is embodied in observable *material forms*--money, real estate, bonds, and stocks; and as such, it is "wholly tangible" (Coleman, 1988). Besides, it may also be "institutionalized in the form of property rights" (Bourdieu, 1986). In educational research, financial capital is measured approximately by a family's wealth or income.

In relation to children's education, financial capital represents the economic capabilities of a family to invest in children's education. To explicate this point, families with rich financial capital possess the economic means/resources to invest in children's education via means of providing their children with a good environment for study at home, sending them to a good school, involving them in educational extracurricular activities, and/or hiring tutors for their children, all of which have been found to be conducive to children's educational achievement.

Human Capital

The concept of "human capital" is an extension of financial capital—it refers to the fact that human beings invest in themselves by means of education and training. The human capital concept is originally a contribution of economists Shultz (1963, 1971) and Becker (1964) to the understanding of the economics of education. In this conceptualization, schooling/education is viewed not just as

consumption, but also as *investment in human capital*. Through schooling/education, individuals acquire skills, knowledge, and capabilities that increase their productivity and their future earnings.

Comparing to financial capital, human capital is less tangible for it exists in *persons* in the embodiment of *skills* and *knowledge*. In educational research, human capital is usually measured by parents' educational attainment; and as such, families differ in human capital. A significant body of research has shown that children's educational outcomes are strongly affected by the human capital possessed by their parents. However, as Coleman (1988) pointed out, parents' human capital can also be irrelevant to their children's educational outcomes if it is not accessible to the children, and this is where social capital fits in.

Social Capital

Coleman (1988) defines "social capital" by its *function*. To him, it represents resources that reside in *function-specific social relationships* that individuals can capitalize on to achieve their own interests. Unlike financial and human capital, social capital is created and maintained by *relationships* of commitment and trust among and between persons; and it may exist both in the family and in the community.

The social capital of the family exists in the positive interactions between children and parents (and when families include other members, interactions with them as well). Coleman argues that "such interactions allow children to translate the financial and human capital present in the family into human capital or some other attribute that increases well-being" (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996: 774). So we can see that, to Coleman, social capital in the family is not simply another variable in the family background that affects children's education; but rather, represents a *mechanism* through which the financial and human capital of parents is transmitted and used by children. Moreover, to Coleman, the absence of social capital within the family represents *deficiencies* in the family, which may manifest itself in two forms: *functional deficiency* (the absence of strong relations between

children and parents despite their physical presence in the household), and *structural deficiency* (the physical absence of family members) (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). And both forms of deficiencies affect the creation of human capital in children.

In Coleman's conceptualization, social capital extends beyond the home and family to the neighborhood, community, and school. Social capital in these larger communities is generated through interconnectedness or "closure" among students, parents, teachers, and other actors in these social structures. Furthermore, obligations and expectations, norms and effective sanctions, information flow capabilities as well as appropriate social organizations in these social structures—all constitute useful capital resources that individuals can capitalize on for their own interests (Coleman, 1990: 313-315).

Cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital is Bourdieu's (1973, 1986) conceptualization in understanding the educational, cultural, and social reproduction in capitalist societies. To Bourdieu, cultural capital is a class-related concept and it represents *the status/high culture* of a society's dominant groups, i.e. those who possess economic and social capital. Cultural capital can exist in three forms: 1) in the *embodied* state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; 2) in the *objectified* state, i.e. in the form of cultural good; and, 3) in the *institutionalized* state, i.e. in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986: 47).

Moreover, to Bourdieu, cultural capital functions as *a mechanism for social reproduction*. As "symbolic wealth" (Bourdieu, 1973: 487) socially designated as valuable, the culture of the dominant groups is validated and distributed through the educational system. Children from privileged families have advantages in adjusting themselves to the school culture, which, in turn, helps facilitate their educational achievement. Thus, the dominant groups are able to maintain their economic and social advantages through educational systems, starting what Bourdieu calls "the circle in which social

capital is added to cultural capital" (1973: 493), which ultimately sets in motion the cycle of social reproduction.

Family Background, Forms of Capital and Children's Educational Outcomes: A Conceptual Framework

As is aforementioned, family background plays important roles in children's educational outcomes. It constitutes advantages and disadvantages that children bring with them to school, which subsequently leads to variances in children's educational outcomes. The concepts of forms of capital provide us with analytical means for understanding the mechanism/process through which family background works to influence children's educational outcomes. Based on the conceptualizations of Coleman and Bourdieu's forms of capital, the following figure provides a conceptual framework illustrating the relationship among family background, the four forms of capital, and children's educational outcomes:

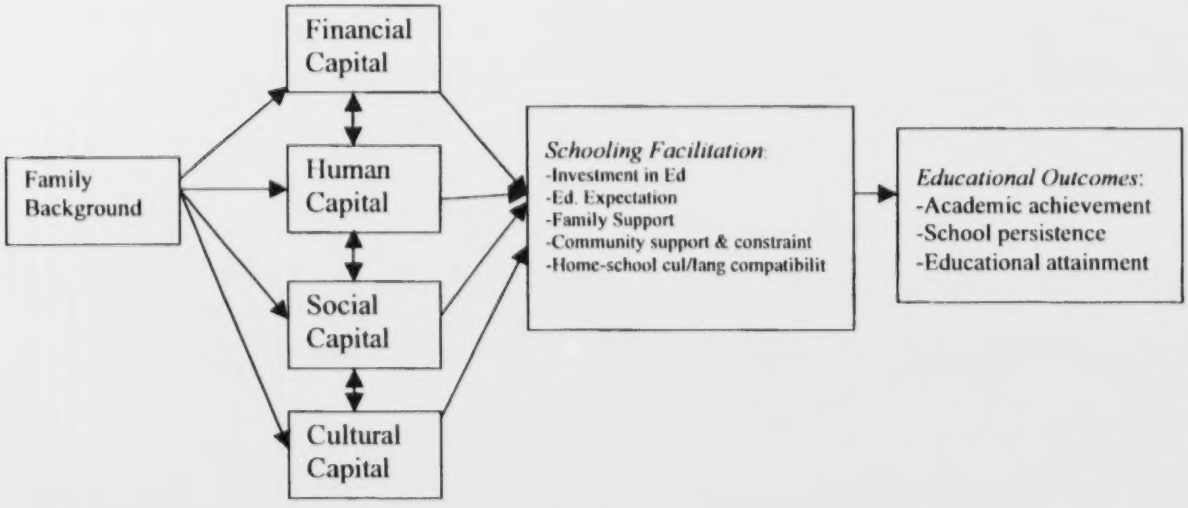


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Variances in Children's Educational Outcomes.

In this conceptual framework, we consider the *joint impact* of financial, human, social, and cultural capital on the creation of human capital (in the form of educational outcomes) in the next generation. This is important for persons' actions are shaped and constrained not merely by the financial and human resources available to them, but also by the social context in which they are embedded (Coleman, 1988). Moreover, a person can also be the agent that initiates, directs, and sanctions actions and changes that are believed to be conducive to the well-being of the next generation.

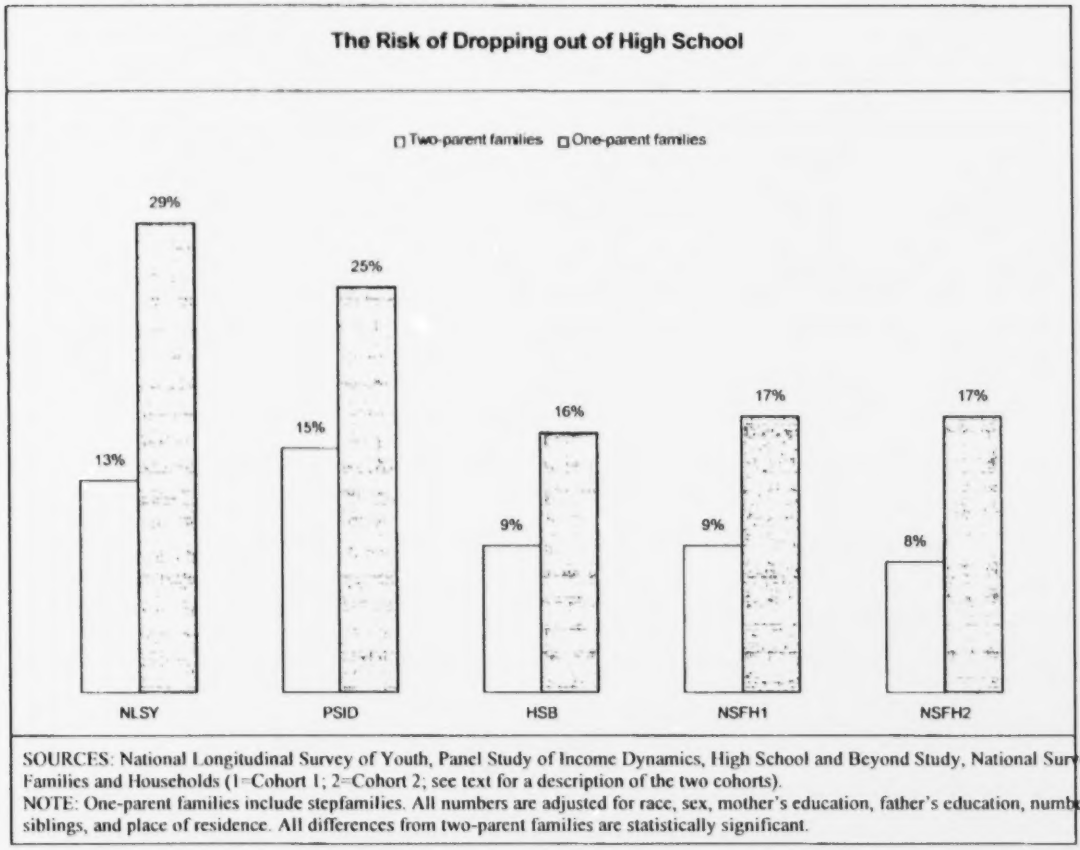
So overall, in this framework, the four forms of capital are regarded to be intricately intertwined with each other and work to reinforce each other, which, in turn, provides the potentials to facilitate children's educational outcomes. Specifically, financial and human capital represents the basic constraints and opportunities associated with a family's resource base. Important as they are, they capture only part of the impact of family background on the education of the children. Social capital, measured by the density and strength of the family support as well as community support and constraint may function in two ways. First, it may function as a *mechanism* through which the financial and human capital of parents and of the larger communities is transmitted to and used by children; and, second, it may function to *supplement* the lack of the financial and human capital in the family so as to bring about the educational outcomes that are socially designated as desirable in a given social structure. Moreover, cultural capital, based upon Bourdieu's conceptualization, is measured by the match or mismatch of individual's language/culture to those validated at school. It represents a mechanism of educational and social reproduction. Finally, educational outcomes considered in this framework include academic achievement, school persistence, and educational attainment.

In the following section, I first briefly present research findings regarding the educational outcomes of the three groups of "children of change," and then I use the above conceptual framework to explain the variances in their educational outcomes.

Children of Change and Their Differential Educational Outcomes: A Search for Explanations

The Case of Single-Parent Children

Research findings have consistently shown that children of single-parent suffer from a variety of short- and long-term negative outcomes, including educational outcomes. For example, McLanahan and Sandefur's (1994) study using four types of national survey data found that children of single-parent were twice as likely to drop out of high school (see Figure 2), were more likely to display "early disengagement from school" (as measured by test score, school attitude, and college expectations), and were less likely to attend and/or graduate from college. Cross-national and cross-cultural studies show similar patterns. For example, Pong's (1996) study on children's school participation in Malaysia found children of one-parent families have significantly lower school participation rate. However, in Pong's (ibid) study, she distinguished between two types of single-motherhood—the divorced/separated mother and the widowed mother. She found that it was the children of the former who had the lowest school participation rate (e.g. 16% for children 17-19 of age), followed by those children whose mother is widowed (32%); and children from two-parent families had the highest school participation rate (42%).


The Risk of Dropping out of High School
Two-parent families
One-parent families
29%
25%
13%
15%
16%
17%
17%
9%
9%
8%
NLSY
PSID
HSB
NSFH1
NSFH2
SOURCES: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Panel Study of Income Dynamics, High School and Beyond Study, National Survey of Families and Households (1=Cohort 1; 2=Cohort 2; see text for a description of the two cohorts).
NOTE: One-parent families include stepfamilies. All numbers are adjusted for race, sex, mother's education, father's education, number of siblings, and place of residence. All differences from two-parent families are statistically significant.

Source: McLanahan, Sara and Gary Sandefur. *Growing Up With A Single Parent: What hurts, What helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. p.41.

Furthermore, in both McLanahan & Sandefur's and Pong's studies, they found what can be called a "race/ethnic effect," i.e. race/ethnicity has mediated the effect of single-parenthood on the impact of children's educational outcomes. In the case of the United States, children of Black single-mother fared the least in regard to family financial and human resources (parent income and education), and educational outcomes. In the case of Malaysia, there exists differential school participation pattern among three groups of single-parent children—Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

The lower educational achievement pattern of the single-parent children can be understood as the joint effect of the deprivation in financial, human, and social capital. Divorce or separation often greatly reduces the family *financial capital* (parent's income), which may trigger a series of consequences. First, the family can afford less to invest in the child's education and education-related activities. Next, the mother may have to spend more time outside the home to make ends meet which ultimately reduces their time and attention on the child, in the event of which *social capital* available to the child in the family is reduced. Moreover, as a result of reduced family financial resources, children in single-parent families are also disadvantaged in terms of getting access to community resources. This is so because they are more likely to reside in disadvantageous neighborhoods, attend poor-quality schools, associate with peers with negative attitudes towards school, and experience greater number of residence mobility, all of which have been shown by research to be associated with lower educational achievement.

However, the conceptual framework based on the concepts of capital fails to account for the mediating effect of race/ethnicity, gender, and culture upon children's educational outcomes. Besides, Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," though may be applicable in explaining the case of the children of Black single-parent in the U.S., does not apply to the context of Malaysia where the collective culture works to minimize the negative impact of single-parenthood upon children's school participation among children of the widowed mother and among the ethnic Chinese.

The Case of Children with Employed Mother

Research findings regarding the effects of maternal employment on children's educational outcomes are *mixed* and the effects are found to have been mediated by such variables as gender, social class, and types of employment. Maternal employment has found to have adverse effect on children's academic achievement, and/or intellectual ability, but only for boys of higher income families (Hoffman, 1989; Desai, Chase-Lansdale, & Michael, 1989). This is especially true for

maternal employment during child's infancy (Desai et. el., 1989). Daughters of employed mother, however, generally achieve higher academic achievement (Alessandri, 1992; Hoffman, 1979, 1980, in Hoffman, 1999).

In addition, for children in poverty, some research has found a positive correlation between maternal employment and academic achievement and some other nonacademic indices, such as independence and achievement and career motivation (e.g., Cherry & Eaton, 1977; Heynes, 1978; Vandell & Ramanan; in Hoffman, 1999). Moreover, some research has found that, while full-time employment of mother may negatively affect parental involvement in the child's education, which, in turn, may lead to lower academic performance of the child, *part-time employment* of mother is associated with the highest level of parent involvement (both at home and at school) and mathematic achievement of adolescence (Muller, 1995).

So findings of these studies show that the influence of maternal employment is not dichotomous, which may as well illustrate that it is hard to gauge the net influence of maternal employment without considering some other important mediating factors. Those factors include family SES, child's gender, age of the child, the timing and types of maternal employment, family structure (including marital status and family size), and family functioning (mother/father's division of labor). We can argue that it is through these intervening variables and some others resulting from maternal employment (e.g., child independence and achievement and career motivation) that maternal employment exerts its impact upon child's academic achievement—be it negative or positive. The conceptual framework based upon the forms of capital are useful in understanding the mechanisms through which maternal employment exerts its mixed impact.

For example, for children from lower-class families, maternal employment may serve to enhance the acquisition of human capital via means of increasing family's *financial capital*. In addition, maternal employment of lower-class families may generate more *social capital* for children

through wider connections and information exchanges in the workplace. For children from middle-class families, however, maternal employment may mean greater loss of *social capital* for, as a result of maternal employment, mother's time, energy, and attention for children may be significantly reduced. While this may be true for children of all backgrounds, the loss of social capital may be more direct for children from middle-class families as research has shown that middle-class mothers are more effective teachers and a greater source of intellectual stimulation for their children (Hoffman, 1989).

However, as for *why* maternal employment differentially impacts the achievement of boys and girls, the conceptual framework does not offer an answer. I think Hoffman's (1989) explanation from psychological perspective makes sense in that it sheds light on not only the traditional differential socialization for boys and girls but also the traditional dichotomous role differentiations between father and mother. Thus, we can see that maternal employment has also intertwined with *cultural factors* in impacting child's academic performance.

The Case of Recent Immigrant/Refugee Children

A significant number of recent studies (e.g., Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992; Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1985; Portes & Zhou, 1994; Suarez-Orezco, 1987; 1989; Zhou & Bankston, 1994, 1998) show that some recent immigrant/refugee groups in the United States do extremely well academically in spite of sharing group characteristics that many researchers have correlated with school failure—lacking both financial and human capital, residing in low-income neighborhoods, attending poor schools, having little or no proficiency in English, and having incompatible culture.

For example, Matute-Bianchi's (1985, in Portes & Zhou, 1994) study on recent Mexican immigrant students in "Field High School" in central California showed that these students had considerably lower dropout rate than the native-born Mexicans, and even than native white students.

Matute-Bianchi's ethnographic fieldwork found that the most academically successful of these Mexican students are those who were proficient in Spanish and claimed their ethnic identity.

Zhou and Bankston's (1994, 1998) study on children of Vietnamese refugees in Versailles Village, New Orleans told another success story of an impoverished immigrant/refugee group. Though their parents compared poorly with average Americans in financial resources and educational attainment, the second-generation Vietnamese students fared well in the U.S. educational systems. Specifically, these researchers found that students who hold onto their "immigrant culture" (Zhou & Bankston, 1994: 822), that is, those who have strong adherence to traditional families, strong commitment to work ethics, and a high degree of personal involvement in the ethnic community tend disproportionally to receive high grades, to have definite college plan, and to score high on academic orientation. In another study (Bankston & Zhou, 1995), these researchers also found that Vietnamese youth's *literacy* in their ethnic language and *identification* with the ethnic group are positively related to academic achievement.

Gibson's (1988) study of Punjabi Sikih immigrant students (Punjabi students, thereafter) at "Valleyside High" in Northern California found similar pattern of educational achievement. As a group, Punjabi students received higher grades than non-Punjabi classmates, had higher percentage of high school graduation rate, were more likely to take advanced academic courses and more likely to enroll in four-year college. Gibson's ethnographic fieldwork revealed that it was what she called "accommodation without assimilation" strategy that had helped Punjab students to achieve educational success.

The success examples of these immigrant/refugee groups all point to the importance of *social capital* and *cultural capital* in the creation of human capital though the cultural capital concept I refer to here differs from Bourdieu's conceptualization. (These several cases all show that the retention of immigrant culture/language and identity are correlated with immigrant children's academic success.

So I postulate that cultural capital for recent immigrant/refugee students means their *ethnic culture/language* and *identity*, and I will discuss more about this in the following section).

As Zhou and Bankston (1998) pointed out, among Vietnamese in Versailles Village, they had rich social capital in both the family and communities. The Vietnamese there had established very tight community functions as both support and control in Vietnamese children's lives. Vietnamese children's literacy in the ethnic language and identification with the ethnic group enable them to get access to both the family and the community resources. Moreover, values emphasized in the family were reinforced in the community, and these shared values constitute a source of direction to guide children in their successful adaptation in American society.

Thus we see that, for these Vietnamese immigrants/refugees children and immigrant children from other groups, though they might be short of financial and human capital in their families, they had rich social and cultural capital. And we can conclude that the social and cultural capital has played a more crucial role in facilitating the educational success of the younger-generation immigrants.

Theoretical Implication

Immigrant Culture and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's conceptualization of "cultural capital" as a mechanism for cultural and social reproduction is powerful in explaining the social reproduction in capitalist society, in particular, in French society, but it has certain limitations.

First, as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital focuses exclusively on the social profits stemming from the *high culture* of a society's status group, it seems to be overly deterministic in shaping outcomes and has ignored the role of agents. In effect, it proves to be like an antithesis of

social capital. It is no wonder that it encounters difficulties when being used to explain the success of recent immigrant/refugee groups in the United States.

Therefore, I propose that the concept of cultural capital be expanded to take into consideration of the culture of the less privileged in the society. I agree with Lareau (1987) that it might be useful to recognize that all social groups have cultural capital when we move beyond studies of elites. In the case of immigrant group, cultural capital may mean their "immigrant culture." As such, ethnic culture, language and identity are all forms of cultural capital.

Historical review shows that American schools' effort to merge diverse groups into a homogenized "American" culture have not resulted in academic success for cultural diverse students. The success examples of the recent immigrant/refugee groups imply that educational policies and practices should take an "additive acculturation" perspective (Gibson, 1988) and look at immigrant culture as an asset that immigrant/refugee students can capitalize on. Schools should encourage cultural/linguistic diversity and work to bridge home and school culture so as to bring about greater academic success among their diverse groups of immigrant students.

Discussion and Conclusion

Family background plays an important role in facilitating children's educational outcomes. The concepts of forms of capital offer us an analytical tool in understanding how family background exert its impact on children's schooling outcomes.

Financial and human capital available at home represents the basic constraints and opportunities associated with a family's resource base. Important as they are, they are not conducive to children's education unless they are activated and made available to children in facilitating their educational outcomes. The same holds for cultural capital (in Bourdieu's term). As Lareau (1987), in her study on home advantage, argued, "class provides social and cultural resources but these

resources must be invested or activated to become a form of cultural capital" (p.715). This is where social capital fits in. Social capital as defined by function-specific relationships can function as a mechanism through which the financial, human, and cultural capitals are activated to bring about the desired educational outcomes in children.

In the case of children of single-parent, we have seen that the role of financial capital looms large in determining their subsequent life chances. However, I argue that single-parent children are not doomed to educational failure if the structural deficiency of the family can be supplemented with *social capital* from both within and outside the family. This points to the importance of building closer and stronger communities where single-parent families can turn, when they need, for financial, social, moral and psychological support. The success examples of some recent immigrant/refugee groups show that the role of social capital is promising in alleviating the adverse effects associated with single-parenthood upon children's educational outcomes.

However, in recognizing the importance of the social capital, we must also recognize that in the case of the United States, race/ethnicity and class have also played important roles in contributing to the poverty and educational problems faced by children from single-parent families. Thus, the actions taken on the part of parents and communities might not work so effectively unless they are supplemented by efforts and actions at the societal level. To be more specific, it would take active interventions enacted by public policies in the larger society that the adverse effects of single-parenthood on children's educational outcomes might be alleviated.

Our analysis of the case of children of employed mother indicates that for a better understanding of the impact of maternal employment on children's educational outcome it is useful by sorting out different effects by social class. The differential impact of maternal employment on children's outcomes attest that different forms of capital may hold different weight in its influence on children's educational outcomes. Moreover, it shows that we need to also take into consideration the

historical and cultural factors (in this case, gender-role differentiation) in understanding the influence of family background on children's education. This implies that there is a need to situate the concepts of forms of capital in the larger historical, social and cultural contexts in understanding their roles in influencing children's educational outcomes.

The case of some recent immigrant/refugee groups can attest to this point. While, in the earlier history in the United States, the retention of one's ethnic language/culture and identity, and the close tie with one's ethnic community were not valued as cultural capital that could contribute to individuals' educational and economic mobility, they are in today's increasingly segmented American society. As Portes & Zhou (1994) pointed out, today it is "those who remained firmly ensconced in their ethnic communities may…have a better chance for educational and economic mobility" (p.21). This is one of the reasons that the concept of cultural capital must be expanded for a better understanding of the educational success of some recent immigrant/refugee groups in the United States.

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